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REVIEW ARTICLE

Turkish commanders discuss counterterrorism strategies and lessons learned from 25 years of fighting the PKK

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This article is an extended book review of the Turkish book *Commanders' Front* (*Komutanlar Cephesi*, Istanbul: Detay Publishing, 2007), written by prominent Turkish journalist Fikret Bila, who compiled a series of interviews with retired Turkish military commanders and two former presidents. It provides a foreign perspective on counterinsurgency/terrorism strategies and lessons learned from Turkey's small war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The interviews reveal the generals' views on Turkey's long-standing fight with the PKK, discussing topics ranging from the social aspect of the PKK problem to mistakes made in arming local militia. In addition, it presents the Turkish perspective on US policy in Iraq.

Keywords: insurgency; terrorism; PKK; Iraq; Turkey; military; counter-insurgency; separatism; northern Iraq; Turkish Armed Forces

Introduction

In November 2007, Turkish journalist Fikret Bila released an important book, *Komutanlar Cephesi (Commanders' Front)*, a compilation of interviews with 10 retired Turkish military commanders and two former presidents. Bila interviewed some of the important Turkish Armed Forces commanders of the last 25 years. The interviews reveal the generals' views on Turkey's long-standing fight with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an insurgent group which uses terrorism as a tactic in its quest to establish an independent Kurdish state in Turkey's southeast. The generals discuss topics ranging from the social aspect of the PKK problem, to the importance of secrecy in mounting successful cross-border operations, to mistakes made such as arming the local militia. The interviews offer counterinsurgent and counterterrorism strategies and perspectives and present the Turkish perspective on US policy in Iraq and the region. The book also illuminates their perspectives on Turkey's controversial 1 March 2003 decision to refuse the use of Turkish territory for US troops to cross into Iraq. Finally, the book provides lessons learned from fighting an insurgent/terror organization as drawn by an experienced army in the Middle East/Eurasia, and one which is familiar with the

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local issues of the region. These lessons could hold important applications for current US commitments to similar struggles.

Eight main themes emerge from the interviews, which are discussed in detail below. Supporting quotations from the book are rendered in English in an effort to give the reader a sense of the style, mood, and feel of the book's content. For each theme, the passages that were the most representative/reflective of the general consensus were chosen. Finally, a discussion of recent developments has been provided by the author to cover measures taken since the generals were interviewed.

Setting the stage: background on the PKK

Founded on Marxist principles, the PKK is considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish and US governments, and the European Union (EU). It began its armed campaign for Kurdish independence in 1984, and it is estimated that approximately 40,000 lives have been lost as a result of its struggle. Weakened after the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK declared a ceasefire and partially withdrew into northern Iraq. The organization has since called off its ceasefire and increased its attacks, particularly after March 2006. It has continued to target Turkish soldiers and civilians in southeastern Turkey. Attacks have even been conducted in large cities, leading to the deaths of thousands. These urban attacks have also included at least one suicide bombing operation in Turkey's capital, Ankara.

Turkey has feared that an independent Kurdistan emerging from the Iraq conflict would embolden separatist aspirations within some its own Kurdish population. With some 13 million Turkish Kurds, Turkey is home to the largest Kurdish population in the world.¹ Ankara has therefore been a vocal advocate for Iraq's territorial integrity, fearing that any federal structure would lead to an independent Kurdistan, and did not initially recognize the 'Kurdish region' designated by the Iraqi constitution.² Since mid December 2007, the Turkish Armed Forces have conducted several cross-border operations against PKK camps in northern Iraq. The fear of an emerging autonomous 'Kurdistan' was evident in the words of the Chief of the General Staff of the time, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, who in April 2007, shortly before the cross-border operations, made sharp comments about the likelihood of Iraq's disintegration and a possible Kurdish state:

When you go to the airport in Suleimaniya you are met with the Kurdish flag, and the Kurdish national anthem. They have even established a central bank. The central bank is issuing money. They use their own currency. An independent structure is being established in the region.... If you ask me as a soldier... whether a military operation needs to be conducted, I would say yes.³

In the same press conference, Büyükanıt commented on the Iraqi constitution:

A good look [at the constitution] reveals: On paper, a federal structure is being created. Three regions composed of a southern Shi'a region, [a] Sunni region, and [a] Kurdish region. But when you study the articles of the constitution, you notice that not only is this not a federation, it is not even a confederation; it is a loose

confederation ready to break apart. Looking at history, we see that confederations don't last very long... they break apart and form separate states.⁴

Given this background, the Turkish Republic finds itself facing a considerable challenge. As a separatist organization, PKK threatens Turkey's territorial integrity. This makes necessary the struggle against it. Hence, it is logical to ask: How have the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) fought against the PKK until now, particularly as a regular force facing an irregular challenge? How has long-term commitment to the violent struggle affected the country, the TAF, and the PKK? What mistakes has Turkey made? How have the positions of the government and the TAF changed? How do those generals who have led the fight against the PKK view the past and future? The book addresses these questions.

The eight main themes of the book

- (1) Among the Turkish generals, there has been widespread suspicion of the US, with some generals alleging that the US has directly or indirectly supported the PKK. There is suspicion as to US intentions towards a possible independent 'Kurdistan', which would come at the expense of Turkey's territorial integrity.
- (2) There is consensus and resentment against the US regarding the July 2003 incident in Suleimaniya, when (based on faulty intelligence) American forces arrested and placed hoods over Turkish special operations personnel.
- (3) All except one general argue that the Turkish Parliament's controversial 1 March 2003 decision to refuse to let US troops enter Iraq via Turkish territory was a mistake.
- (4) There is consensus that it was an error to arm local militias in northern Iraq and to field them without adequate supervision against the PKK.
- (5) There is consensus that the Turkish military has to change and adapt to fight the asymmetric challenge posed by the PKK. In fact, in light of all the recommendations from the generals in the book, the Turkish military has recently made some necessary changes. General Doğan Güreş (Chief of General Staff, 1990–1994) states that the concept of 'area dominance/control' has led to some success against the PKK.
- (6) The generals identify several difficulties in fighting the PKK, including its 'invisibility'; its local and its external/international support; and its proximity to insurgents in Iraq, which has allowed both sanctuary and absorption of tactical lessons.
- (7) There is unanimity that the captured PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan should have been executed, especially given the consequences which have followed his not being executed.
- (8) The generals also discuss their opinions on possible solutions to the terror problem, ranging from increased education, to micro-credit, to cutting off local and international support.

Detailed discussion of each theme

'The US supports the PKK and wants an independent Kurdish state'

Certain developments that occurred while Turkey was fighting the PKK have created suspicion of the US. In particular, the way events unfolded after the 1991 Gulf War led to a lack of trust by most Turkish generals. Most of them believe that, during the First Gulf War, the US not only supported the Kurds in northern Iraq but also helped the PKK. The most important reasons for this mistrust have to do with perceived US support of Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani (against Turkey); perceived US support for the PKK; and, most importantly, the 'Suleimaniya' or 'Hood Incident' (discussed below). Overall, the generals display frustration with the lack of US support for Turkey's fight against the PKK.

Lieutenant General Hasan Kundakçı's (Commander of the Southeastern Region Gendarmerie, 1993–1995) summarizes the issue as follows:

Whenever the US entered Iraq, it helped the PKK, and hurt us. Particularly during the second Gulf War, it enabled the PKK to gain significant strength. Turkey was among the most hurt from the second Gulf War. Barzani, Talabani and the PKK gained a lot from US operations. The US, unfortunately, in its effort to create the 'Greater Middle East Project' and protect its own interests, helped them. (p. 154)

Lieutenant General Altay Tokat (Commander of the Southeastern Region Gendarmerie, 1995–1997) claims that the US would like to see an independent Kurdistan:

The US wants to continue its status as the sole super-power, and thus wants loyal and trustworthy states which it can manipulate. The formation of an independent [Kurdish] state in northern Iraq, which will be under US control, is consistent with US national interests and its 'Greater Middle East Project'. Therefore, the US supports the establishment of an independent state in northern Iraq... Iraq is going through a disintegration process.... Eventually, there will be a state in northern Iraq which will take territory from Turkey, Iran, and Syria and become a Greater Kurdistan. Such a development will strengthen the PKK and will be extremely dangerous for our [Turkey's] security and territorial integrity. (p. 177)

General Doğan Güreş in particular displays this suspicion while discussing Turkish territorial integrity through a reference to 'maps depicting a divided Turkey' (p. 80; Güreş was alluding to a US-produced map of a 'new Middle East' displayed at a NATO military college in 2006).

There is also widespread suspicion that the US provides the PKK with weapons. In the summer of 2007, shortly before the book came out, the Turkish media reported that US-made weapons were found in the possession of the PKK. The situation became public after PKK deserters claimed that US trucks delivered weapons to their camps in the Qandil Mountains. 'Striking Confessions from Surrendered Terrorists', asserted a typical headline. Many articles gave detailed accounts of PKK assertions that two US armored vehicles brought weapons to PKK camps, including remote-controlled land mines from northern Iraq. According to one PKK member, 'American soldiers brought M-16 long rifles and

various equipment to the organization with their trucks. All the explosives [that the organization uses] are being brought into Turkey from Iraq.⁵ (US officials declared that it was not their policy to arm the PKK, which the Washington considers a terror organization, and suggested that the weapons had been stolen, lost, or smuggled into Turkey after being sold in Iraq's black market.⁶)

'The 'Suleimaniya' or 'Hood Incident' was a major blow to Turkish pride'

One of the most serious blows to Turkish–American relations, according to the generals, and one which Turkey will ‘never forget’, was the ‘Suleimaniya’ or ‘Hood’ incident. On 4 July 2003, US troops raided the Turkish military’s liaison office in Suleimaniya, Iraq and placed hoods on Turkish Special Forces soldiers, detaining them under harsh conditions for days. The alleged reason was intelligence reports that the Turkish team was preparing to assassinate the Governor of Kirkuk. Lieutenant General Altay Tokat, in response to a question on how he thought the Turkish team should have reacted to the ‘Hood Incident’, states:

On 4 July 2003, US soldiers placed hoods over heads of a Turkish military team who were on duty in Suleimaniya in northern Iraq. They were taken to Baghdad as hostages, then questioned, then released. This incident, which has tarnished our national pride and dignity, will go down in Turkish history as a dark page... In future years, when the US celebrates its independence on the 4th of July, we will continue to feel the pain of this incident. I condemn those who caused such pain to our nation through this incident. (pp. 173–4)

General Hilmi Özkök (Chief of General Staff, 2002–2006) agrees that the incident was very insulting to the Turkish people:

Turns out, the Americans had incorrect intelligence... Sometimes US soldiers do stupid things... However, the incident really hurt Turkish pride. I believe that they didn't know how hurtful it would be to us.... This is very normal for them. It is just a practical solution – instead of covering the hostage's eyes, you put a bag over their heads. But did they know the insulting meaning that such an action has? I don't think so. Despite this, it is unforgivable. (pp. 240–4)

'The 1 March 2003 decision was a mistake'

The generals regard the 1 March 2003 decision to refuse US troops the use of Turkish territory to enter Iraq (commonly referred to as the *tezkere* or ‘the motion’) as a mistake. Only one of the interviewees, General Necati Özgen (Diyarbakır Gendarmerie Commander, 1991–1995), believes that it was the right decision. All the other generals view it as a lost historical opportunity to end the PKK presence in northern Iraq and prevent a situation that was politically favorable to the Kurdish groups there. They also believe that the refusal of the US request actually accelerated the formation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq under US protection.

Similarly, Lieutenant General Altay Tokat claims that if Turkey had allowed ‘the motion’ to pass, it would have had a much larger role in how the events in northern Iraq developed:

With the refusal of the motion, Turkey lost an historical opportunity for our national interests. The developments in Iraq are extremely important for our national interests and security... The 1 March motion was an opportunity for US to influence those developments, but we missed it. The PKK would have been completely obliterated, but we missed the chance. There are 3.5 million Kurds living in northern Iraq,... and today, because the motion was not passed, they are rapidly moving towards their dream of establishing an independent state. This is a serious danger to our national security... Economically, we lost the opportunity to profit from the region’s investments and oil. Plus, our relations with the US have suffered, and they have placed hoods on our heads.... I believe it was a historical mistake. (p. 172)

Süleyman Demirel (President of Turkey, 1993–2000) also argues that Turkey should have entered Iraq, along with the US:

Turkey’s goal is to prevent any developments that will lead to the formation of an independent state which will threaten Turkey’s territorial integrity. If we don’t take risks when necessary, we will suffer later on. That is my thought. Turkey should have entered northern Iraq. If we had done that, no independent, autonomous formation would have emerged there under the protection of the US. The area would have been under Turkey’s protection/control. And, Turkey would not have still been complaining that the PKK was finding a safe haven there. (p. 284)

‘Arming local militias was a mistake’

In Turkey’s fight against the PKK, it had, in the past, collaborated with Kurdish leaders such as Celal Talabani and Massoud Barzani. In some cases, Turkey provided weapons to the local (northern Iraqi) militias with the promise that they would fight the PKK, as they did in 1992. However, the consensus in the book is that this was a mistake. Unsupervised, once the militia had the weapons, they did not want to fight the PKK, and the local militia turned against Turkish forces. An important ‘lesson learned’, which General Hilmi Özkök discusses, is that trusting local leaders to fight on Turkey’s side was a strategic mistake which not only strengthened the PKK in the eyes of their followers but also strengthened local *peshmerga* units with weapons (p. 226).

‘Asymmetric warfare techniques have changed the tactical landscape’

All the generals hold that the development of asymmetric war techniques changed the tactical landscape. A new and more effective way to fight such armed groups, they argue, is the concept of ‘area control/dominance’, which entails dominating the area by leaving forces there after an attack. The interviewees seemed quite unaware that such had been standard practice since at least the early modern era.

Nevertheless, most of the evidence in the book supports an assessment of a continued tactical, kinetic focus upon the PKK problem. General Güreş, for

example, discusses how, in a 1992 operation, he was able to bring 50,000 men up to the Iraqi border in relative secrecy. The efforts of Turkish military engineers allowed the insertion of armored units along PKK escape routes in mountainous areas, enabling his forces to land a serious blow. General Güreş also claims that modern insurgencies such as the PKK should be dealt with by smaller units such as the Turkish Special Forces, which are able to fight and operate in the mountains 'like a Turkish PKK'. He proudly discusses the first Special Forces battalion:

We formed it in Ankara. They trained in the mountains and valleys. They walked for days. They carried equipment. They got weapons training. They lived in nature. They got used to the terrain. Each one of them became a special soldier. They can do anything... When their training was complete, they went to the southeast. They were the unsung heroes of the southeast. They were like a 'Turkish PKK.' They would stay in the mountains like the terrorists and live in those conditions. They would find the terrorists in the mountains and deal with them there. (p. 46)

General Ismail Hakkı Karadayı (Chief of General Staff, 1994–1998) also points out the value of surprise in making cross-border raids. According to him, only an offensive posture is suitable in dealing with terrorism:

In fighting against any terrorist, there is a high risk if it is not being conducted in the form of a raid. You have to be in the offensive position, not in the defending position... You have to have the power to conduct raids and you have to conduct them suddenly. You cannot have a raid with a prior declaration. (p. 112)

General Özkök describes the growth of battlefield technology such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as going hand in hand with the development of asymmetrical warfare. Large-scale operations are no longer the preferred method for dealing with modern insurgencies, according to Özkök. Again, whether from the manner in which questions were framed or the recording of the responses, no evidence is provided which is understood by the respondents as to just how parochial their views on 'terrorism' and 'insurgency' come across when considered within historical trends or global context.

'There are difficulties in fighting an organization like the PKK'

The first and foremost difficulty in fighting an organization such as the PKK, say the interviewees, is its 'invisibility', by which they mean the difficulty of discerning insurgents from the population. Their invisibility is increased, first, by the fact that they operate in small, light groups, making them hard to spot, and by the fact that they conceal themselves in less accessible, mountainous areas. General Hilmi Özkök claims:

The armed elements on the other side have an important strategic depth. They have one sack, which they can put on their back, and move 200 km. They have other people who know and support them there. They don't have war operation centers, officers' clubs, dormitories, training centers for us to target. (p. 229)

Second, the PKK is learning from events in Iraq and adapting the use of IEDs, suicide bombs, and landmines to their purposes. These tools, which can be

remotely controlled by cell phone or other signaling devices, make it possible for PKK elements to attack and retreat without direct confrontation.

The third difficulty is that when embedded within a friendly population, the PKK receives assistance from ‘collaborators’, such as village heads or religious leaders. These provide supplies and assist in concealing the movement and its activities.

The fourth difficulty is identified as external support. General Yaşar Büyükanıt (Chief of the General Staff, 2006–2008) says:

Terror organizations with no external support have no chance of surviving. Today, the PKK terror organization has a high level of external support. This is not just financial support, but also political. I’m sad to report this.... There are countries among our allies who directly or indirectly support the PKK.... Such an alliance negatively impacts our fight.⁷

To counter these difficulties in fighting the PKK, İlker Başbuğ (Land Forces Commander/Commander of the Turkish Army, 2006–2008; Chief of the General Staff, 2008–2010) presents a twofold strategy consisting of a psychological and a military approach. The strategy calls for the establishment of a state institution to wage a psychological war and create new policies to influence the people of the region and potential PKK collaborators. The military dimension of the strategy calls for all commando brigades to be professionalized:

It is hard to fight against landmines and hand-made explosive attacks.... We are making six commando brigades one hundred percent professional. There will be no reserves in the commando brigades in the near term. The reserves will be assigned to internal security units.... Why are we doing this? To achieve continuity.⁸

‘Not executing Öcalan was a mistake’: ‘The death penalty should apply to terrorists’

The PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in February 1999. However, due to Turkey’s aspirations to join the EU, the death penalty was lifted, and he was not executed. He is currently serving a life sentence on the isolated island of Imralı. In their comments, the generals focus on the fact that it was a mistake not to execute him, because it enabled the captured leader to continue leading and ‘inspiring’ his followers from prison (through statements released through his lawyer). Lieutenant General Hasan Kundakçı says:

[Once the death penalty was lifted], he [Öcalan] said, ‘Turkey cannot execute me anymore.’ And today, he is able to do certain things because of this. He can direct his organization. Before the death penalty was lifted, he absolutely wasn’t able to do any such thing. We lost out from this. (p. 153)

Lieutenant General Altay Tokat says:

After Apo [Abdullah Öcalan’s shortened nickname] was captured, he was tried. The courts gave the death penalty. The High Court approved. Then the Parliament had to approve it. However the decision was held up in the Parliament. And Apo was, in a way, forgiven. This historical and strategic mistake enabled the PKK, which, at the time had become a marginal organization, to survive. When the death penalty was lifted, the organization became hopeful. The militia in the region campaigned that

'they can't execute him anyway' and they became more powerful. For any terror or illegal organization to be destroyed, it is essential that the leader and his top aides are obliterated... It was a huge mistake not to enforce Öcalan's death penalty. (pp. 165–6)

The death penalty should be applied to terrorists. (p. 177)

Similarly, Kenan Evren (Chief of the General Staff, 1978–1983; President of Turkey, 1982–1989) claims that Öcalan should have been executed:

It was a mistake not to execute Öcalan. I think people were afraid of the European Union and the U.S.... If he had been executed when it was decided, there would be no issue left. Of course, every year, on the anniversary [of his execution] they [the PKK] would do something. Demonstrations and other things would happen. However, he wouldn't be able to direct the PKK from prison like he is doing now. He is leading the PKK from Imrali [the island where he is imprisoned] through his lawyer. (p. 17)

'Military Operations are necessary but not sufficient in fighting terror'

One aspect that comes through in the interviews is a general acknowledgment that successful counterterrorism efforts must now have a political, diplomatic, and social dimension, in addition to the exercise of military force. When asked how the fight against the PKK should be carried out, Lieutenant General Altay Tokat says:

First of all, there needs to be corresponding views between the civilian and military establishments on the nature and extent of the threat. Intelligence coordination is essential and must be accelerated. Everyone must acknowledge that separatist terror is the hardest type of terror to fight against and accept that it is a 'low intensity conflict'. This requires that all national resources (political, military, economic, and socio-cultural) be mobilized. However, everyone must realize that military force [alone] is not sufficient. (pp. 177–8)

He also adds that education and cutting off support to such groups is critical:

I see the crucial elements of any fight against terrorism to be the following: Educating the locals of the area (where the terror organization is based); preventing new recruitment to the organization; cutting off the external support that the PKK gets... In addition, any communication between their leader and the group must absolutely be prevented. (p. 170)

General Özkök sees improved educational facilities and economic innovations such as micro-credit as the path to reduced tensions in Kurdish southeastern Turkey:

We spent a lot of money on trying to develop the southeastern part of the country [where most of Turkey's Kurds live and where the PKK initially started]. But any investment in an area must go hand in hand with the corresponding education that teaches how to best use that investment... Due to a lack of proper education, the local population doesn't know how to leverage that investment and grow it. Instead they view it as short-term; as money that will eventually run out. (p. 217)

Another important diagnosis that General Özkök makes is that the only way to end PKK terror is to 'end their hope [that they can succeed]' (p. 220). He also claims that the PKK problem would disappear if Turkey were to become a full

member of the EU. He claims that if this were to happen, external support to the PKK would dry up, and the organization would disintegrate (p. 221).

General Aytaç Yalman (Commander in Chief of the Gendarmerie, 2000–2002; Commander of the Turkish Land Forces, 2002–2004) claims that it is important to address the social issue of a problem before it becomes a terror problem. In addition, he discusses the importance of the assimilation of different ethnic groups within a society (p. 201). There is no evidence that he or the other interviewees make a distinction between insurgents with a social base and pure terrorists isolated from the population. Instead, acts of terror lead to use of the term ‘terrorists’.

Developments since fall 2007

What was happening shortly before and when the book came out in November 2007? Have any of these perceptions changed? It is important to note that many of the suspicions about the US have changed. The situation in the fall of 2007 and developments since then can be summarized as follows.

Prior to November 2007, the PKK had stepped up its attacks, including two large attacks in the fall of 2007 which killed dozens of Turkish soldiers. At that time, many in Turkey were expressing concern over the state of the US–Turkey strategic partnership due to the perceived diverging security interests of the two nations. The general perception was that the US, given its interests in maintaining stability in northern Iraq, had implicitly sided with the PKK. Many pointed to US failure to take action to support Turkey’s attempts to prevent the PKK from launching attacks on Turkey from bases in northern Iraq. As such, many claimed that Turkey and US security interests were no longer aligned and that the two countries were no longer strategic partners or even allies. Turkish analysts also criticized the alleged US ‘double-standard’ in its fight against terror, claiming that while Turkish soldiers fought in Afghanistan for the US-led War on Terror, this support had not been reciprocated by the US on the PKK issue.

Accompanying these criticisms were calls for the Turkish government to restrict US access to the vital joint air base in Incirlik used by the US for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹ Such assessments reflected Turkey’s increasing frustration and perception that it was being left to face its ‘terrorism problem’ alone. Then-Chief of the General Staff General Yaşar Büyükanıt said in a press statement in June 2007 that he did not find US support for Turkey satisfactory:

We have several requests from the US There should be no ‘double standards’ in the fight against terrorism. Both the Taliban and the PKK are terrorists. Right now we cannot say that the US has provided enough support in fighting the PKK We have a very long history with the US Turkey deserves much more support on the issue of the PKK. So far, it has not received it.¹⁰

However, a key turning point followed on 5 November 2007, when then-President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan discussed cooperation against the PKK. President Bush declared the PKK a terrorist organization and an enemy of Turkey, Iraq, and the US. A tripartite military

arrangement between Turkey, Iraq, and the US was to be formed to cooperate against the PKK; and the US agreed to provide ‘actionable intelligence’ to help Turkish troops locate and attack PKK targets.¹¹ Coming at a time when Turkish public dissatisfaction with the US had reached unprecedented levels, the agreements resulting from the meeting were welcomed by Turks, many of whom viewed them as a significant and binding commitment by the US.

Following the meeting, many argued that Turkey was entering a ‘new operation phase’ against the PKK with a ‘green light’ from the US.¹² Columnist Türker Altan of the mass daily *Radikal* wrote, ‘It looks like the two sides [US and Turkey] have agreed on a limited Turkish operation aimed at PKK targets in northern Iraq.’¹³ Foreign policy expert Mehmet Ali Birand remarked in the daily *Hürriyet*, ‘The Turkish delegation left the US with an impression that the US has given a green light to a limited and short-term land operation and air bombardments . . . Turkey now believes that it has an international green light for a limited land and air strike, and it will strike [the PKK bases] when necessary.’¹⁴

Many focused on the significance of Bush’s statements and their implications for a US role in combating the PKK. Former parliamentarian Hasan Celal Güzel wrote in the mass daily *Radikal*, ‘By saying that the PKK is an enemy of the US and Iraq, Bush has taken on a legal responsibility in front of the international community. From now on, it will not be easy for the US to stay out of the fight against the PKK.’¹⁵ Columnist Cengiz Çandar, writing for the business daily *Referans*, concluded that Bush’s identification of the PKK as an enemy of the US reversed any damage that may have resulted from disagreements over regional security issues:

The US President’s emphasis that ‘The PKK is an enemy of the US’ should not be underestimated. The PKK has a new name now: an enemy of the US. For an armed group like the PKK to be named ‘an enemy of the US’ will inevitably have a fatal impact on the organization . . . Thus, the US has entered into a ‘fight against the PKK’ as never before and this signals . . . that the PKK’s dissolution phase has started . . . This means that the . . . damages [previously] done to Turkish-American relations have been overcome.¹⁶

Following that key meeting between then-President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, Turkey’s generals hailed this promised cooperation as the beginnings of a US–Turkish strategic partnership revival. Skeptics who previously floated ideas of retaliatory action against the US, such as limiting US use of the Incirlik Air Base, also changed their assessment of the situation, acknowledging that the US had demonstrated sincerity.¹⁷

On 16 December 2007, Turkey started conducting cross-border operations against PKK camps in northern Iraq. Following the first round of operations, Yaşar Büyükanıt, then-chief of the Turkish General Staff, told Turkish mainstream *Kanal D* television on 17 December that the precision strikes were in part based on ‘intelligence provided by the US’.¹⁸ Turkish President Abdullah Gül has also expressed, ‘We [Turkey and the US] are sharing intelligence. Our cooperation suits that of allies. Both sides are happy.’¹⁹ The Turkish media also

credited the US for providing intelligence that enabled Turkey's military to strike exact PKK targets without killing civilians.

Military analyst Ömer Taşpinar of the mass daily *Today's Zaman* noted in his column:

There is no doubt about what salvaged this badly strained Turkish-American partnership from the brink of total collapse: Serious American support against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which finally came in the form of 'actionable intelligence' and a tacit 'green light' for air strikes in northern Iraq.... It is remarkable how fast the negative image of the United States began to change in Turkey once such cooperation against the PKK took place. This is hardly surprising, since a crucial part of Turkish anti-Americanism was fueled by the perception that the US was 'protecting' the PKK against Ankara.²⁰

Mehmet Ali Birand, an analyst for the mass daily *Hürriyet*, gave a similar assessment:

These operations give the message that the US has opened northern Iraq to the Turkish Armed Forces and that the Turkish-US cooperation is being implemented. With this move, Washington has shown that it prefers Turkey, not [Kurdish Regional Government leader Massoud] Barzani [who Turkey claims is sheltering the PKK]. So... when the US said that 'the PKK is our common enemy,' they were actually being sincere.²¹

Milliyet, which only a few months earlier, had advocated that Turkey 'inflict pain on the US' as retaliation for its alleged inaction over the PKK, stated:

It is important that these operations [against the PKK] have taken place with US cooperation. It is an open secret that at least part of the intelligence was provided by the US. Thus, Turkish-American relations, which had broken off with the 1 March [2003] motion [of the Turkish parliament refusing US use of Turkish territory to enter Iraq]; and which [later] hit rock bottom... have now entered a period of normalization.²²

Nevertheless, the press of events in Iraq caused concern. In November 2008, the Iraqi parliament ratified the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Iraq and the United States. This agreement set a course for a new relationship between the US and Iraq, and it established a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraqi cities and for all troops to leave the country by the end of 2011.²³ Turkish generals became concerned that the departure of US troops would mark the end of their ability to conduct cross-border operations against PKK camps in northern Iraq and of the flow of American intelligence that had enabled its cross-border strikes on PKK bases.

Ankara also became worried about a power vacuum emerging in Iraq in which sectarian and ethnic clashes could spill over into Turkey. For reasons discussed earlier in this article, Turkey is also concerned that the emergence of a power vacuum following the US withdrawal could spark sectarian and ethnic clashes in Iraq that could easily spill over to Turkey.²⁴ The author of *Commanders' Front*, Fikret Bila, summarized the concerns in his daily column in *Milliyet*:

Based on its agreement with the US, Turkey has been conducting cross-border air strikes into northern Iraq against the PKK. How will Turkey conduct these operations once control of the airspace is transferred to the Iraqi government? Will it be able to secure an agreement with the Baghdad government, as it did with the US Government? Would the Kurdish Regional Government, which has influence over the Baghdad administration, create a problem?²⁵

Conclusion

The book has been regarded as an important work in Turkey due to the fact that all the interviewees are highly respected and experienced generals and/or past presidents. In particular, the generals' concessions that they had made mistakes in dealing with Kurds in Turkey have generated much discussion. However, the general consensus is that any threat to the unitary nature of Turkey and its territorial integrity, such as posed by the PKK, is unacceptable and must be fought. It is clear that the coming fight will be on this axis, with Turkish generals refusing to conceive of an independent 'Kurdistan' which encompasses parts of Turkey.

Another important revelation that comes out of the book is that Turkish generals have held deep suspicions about the US, which are directly related to the PKK terror issue and concerns over Iraq's territorial integrity. For now, this perception has been reversed since the US declared that the PKK was an 'enemy of Iraq, the US, and Turkey' and pledged to provide assistance to Turkey in the form of actionable intelligence. It remains to be seen how US withdrawal from Iraq will affect these commitments and hence US–Turkish relations. Any diminution of the intelligence provided to Turkish forces could embolden the PKK. Moreover, the threat that Iraq's central government will seek to curtail Turkish offensives in northern Iraq will also serve as an obstacle to fighting PKK terrorism. Even as many generals warn that Turkey may be on the brink of upsetting events, they also hope that the US will manage its post-withdrawal plans carefully and take note of Turkey's concerns in the process.²⁶

Notes

1. The Kurds are the largest nation without a state. It is estimated that there are about 25 million Kurds, with 13 million in Turkey, 5 million in Iran, 4.5 million in Iraq, about 1 million in Syria, and a total of 1 million in other regions.
2. Bhadrakumar, 'Iraqi Kurds Play with Turkish Fire'.
3. 'Büyükanıt: Kuzey Irak'a Operasyon Yapılmalı'.
4. 'Cumhurbaşkanı Seçimi Meclis'in Bileceği Bir İş'.
5. 'Şırnak'ta Teslim Olan Teröristlerden Çarpıcı İtiraflar'.
6. Cloud and Schmitt, 'US Weapons, Given to Iraqis, Move to Turkey'.
7. 'PKK Terörünün Dış Desteği Var'.
8. 'Orgeneral Başbuğ: Tüm Komando Tugayları Profesyonel Olacak'.
9. 'Hükümet Önceliklerini Gözden Geçirmeli'.
10. 'Org. Büyükanıt'tan Sürpriz Basın Toplantısı'.
11. 'PKK Türkiye ve ABD'nin Düşmanı'.
12. Birand, 'Türkiye, En Riskli Sürece Girdi'.

13. Alkan, 'Halkı Kaybetmemek!'.
14. Birand, 'PKK'ya Karşı İlk Defa bir Koalisyon Oluştı'.
15. Güzel, 'ABD Gezisindeki Muamma'.
16. 'Beyaz Saray'dan Çıkan Sonuç: PKK'nın Tasfiyesi Süreci'.
17. 'Çuval Skandalından İstihbarat İşbirliğine'.
18. Bekdil, 'Smoothen Times Ahead for Troubled Allies US and Turkey'.
19. 'İşbirliğinden Biz de ABD de Memnun'.
20. Taşpinar, 'New Optimism in Turkish-American Relations'.
21. Birand, 'Bilanço Değil, Verdiği Mesaj Önemli'.
22. 'Çuval Skandalından İstihbarat İşbirliğine'.
23. Rubin and Campbell, 'Iraq Backs Deal That Sets End of US Role'.
24. 'Çankaya: Obama Acknowledges Turkey's Right to Fight Terrorism'.
25. Bila, 'ABD'nin Çekilmesi Türkiye'yi Nasıl Etkiler?'.
26. Çandar, 'The US-Iraq Agreement and Turkey's Dilemma'.

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